

Alcohol

How much is too much?



One + all | we care

Alcohol - how much is too much?

Alcohol is something to be enjoyed, but drinking too much or at the wrong time can be harmful. It is important to know where the benefits end and the risks begin.

The weekly guideline for low risk drinking is:

- **14 units for women**
- **14 units for men.**

It is not safe to save up your daily units and drink them in one go.

A binge is 6 units or more for women, and 6 units or more for men in one drinking session.

After an episode of heavy drinking, it is advisable to avoid drinking for 48 hours to allow your body to recover.

One in four men and one in seven women exceed the recommended daily units of alcohol. Many people underestimate how much they actually drink.

What is lower risk drinking?

Lower risk drinking is drinking in a way that is unlikely to cause harm to yourself or others. The government advises that:

- men should not regularly drink more than 2-3 units a day
- women should not regularly drink more than 2-3 units a day.

What is higher risk drinking?

This is drinking at levels that lead to significant harm to physical and mental health and at levels that may be causing substantial harm to others. Women who drink over 35 units a week (or who regularly drink over six units a day) and men who drink over 35 units a week (or who regularly drink over 6 units a day) are at high risk of such harm. There are times when it is sensible not to drink - when driving, operating machinery or when taking certain medications.

What if I am pregnant?

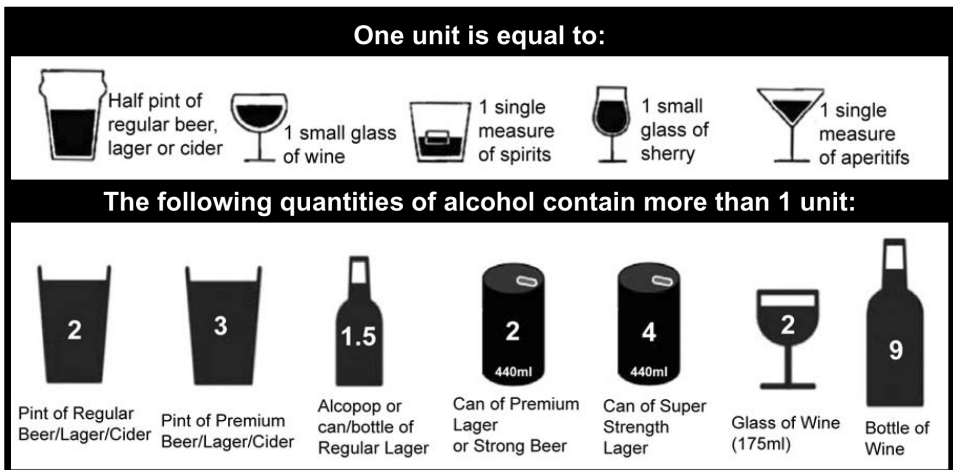
Pregnant women should avoid alcohol altogether and never drink more than 1-2 units once or twice a week.

The latest NICE guidelines give the following advice for pregnant women (or women planning a pregnancy):

- avoid alcohol in the first three months of pregnancy because there may be an increased risk of miscarriage
- If you do choose to drink, do not drink more than 1-2 units of alcohol once or twice a week
- do not get drunk
- be aware that getting drunk or binge drinking during pregnancy may be harmful to the unborn baby.

What is a unit?

A unit of alcohol is 10ml of pure alcohol. Counting units of alcohol can help to keep track of the amount drunk. The list below shows the number of units of alcohol in common drinks.



What harm can alcohol do?

Harm to health	Crime and anti-social behaviour
Loss of productivity in the workplace	Social harms, such as family breakdown

- 20% of patients presenting to primary care are likely to be excessive drinkers and problem drinkers are known to consult their GPs twice as often than the average patient. The most common complaints are gastrointestinal, psychiatric and accidents.
- 1 in 4 acute male admissions are alcohol-related.
- At least 5-7% of diagnosed cases of hypertension are due to heavy drinking and it is the most common cause after obesity.
- Alcohol misuse is implicated in 50% of violent crimes and around a third of all domestic violence is linked to alcohol.
- Around £1 in every £3 spent in Emergency departments is alcohol related.
- Around one million children live in families where one or both parents misuse alcohol.
- 40% of 13-14 year olds were drunk when they first had sexual intercourse.
- Around 25% of children aged 11-15 drink alcohol, drinking an average of around 10 units per week.

What are the health benefits of alcohol?

Alcohol can protect against coronary heart disease. However the protective effect is only significant for men over 40 and post-menopausal women, and the maximum benefit is gained from drinking between one and two units a day.

Both non-drinkers and drinkers can do other things to reduce their risk of coronary heart disease, such as stopping smoking, eating a healthy diet, and being physically active.

What are the risks?

Regularly drinking too much increases the following risks of long-term damage to health including:

Condition	Increased risk	
	Men	Women
Hypertension (high blood pressure)	4 times	Double
Stroke	Double	4 times
Coronary heart disease (CHD)	1.7 times	1.3 times
Pancreatitis	Triple	Double
Liver disease	13 times	13 times

Other risks of damage to health include:

- some cancers (mouth, gullet, liver, colon and breast)
- sexual difficulties such as impotence
- alcohol is connected to a range of mental health problems including: depression, anxiety, sleeping problems, panic attacks and chronic fatigue. Alcohol can exacerbate mental health problems and delay recovery.

Harm to others

Binge drinking can also cause potential harm to others through:

- accidents – increased risk of injury and death from fire and car crashes
- violence – physical and sexual assaults and domestic violence
- argumentative behaviour
- unsafe sex
- emotional and financial problems.

FACT – It is **not** true that Guinness is rich in iron - you would need to drink more than 35 pints per day to get the recommended daily intake of iron!

What are the effects of alcohol?

- Alcohol is a depressant drug and slows reactions.
- Alcohol disrupts the natural sleep pattern.
- Alcohol causes the surface of the body to heat up but cools down the core temperature.
- Within minutes of drinking, alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream and carried to all parts of the body, including the brain.
- A healthy liver takes about one hour to break down and remove one unit of alcohol.
- Alcohol causes dehydration and lowers the blood sugar levels.
- Alcohol is loaded with calories, but has no real nutrition value.
- People who drink regularly become less affected by alcohol (tolerance) as their bodies get used to it. They need to drink more for it to have the same effect and although they may not feel drunk, they still run a serious risk of damaging their health.

Risk	Men	Women	Common effects
Lower risk	No more than 2-3 units per day on a regular basis	No more than 2-3 units a day on a regular basis	Increased relaxation Sociability Reduced risk of heart disease (for men over 40 and post-menopausal women)
Increasing risk	More than 2-3 units per day on a regular basis	More than 2-3 units per day on a regular basis	Progressively increasing risk of: low energy memory loss relationship problems depression
Higher risk	More than 6 units per day on a regular basis or more than 35 units per week	More than 6 units per day on a regular basis or more than 35 units per week	insomnia impotence injury alcohol dependence high blood pressure liver disease cancer

What other physical changes occur due to harmful drinking?

- **Dry skin** – alcohol dehydrates your body and skin, because it blocks the release of anti-diuretic hormones, so the kidneys get rid of too much water.
- **Broken veins** – alcohol dilates blood vessels near the surface of the skin, causing ugly red capillaries or veins, especially around the nose and cheeks.
- **Bloodshot eyes** – alcohol can inflame and enlarge the small blood vessels on the surface of the eyes.
- **Weight gain** – see table below.

If you are watching your weight, watch your drinking. The recommended daily calorie intake for women is 2,000 and for men 2,500.			
Drink	Units	Calories	Food equivalent
White wine (175ml)	2.1	130	A bag of crisps
Red wine (175ml)	2.1	120	A slice of cheese and tomato pizza
Lager or beer (a pint)	2.3	170	A small sausage roll
Cider (a pint)	3.4	200	A mince pie
Tequila (25ml)	1.0	160	A doughnut
Alcopop (275ml)	1.4	200	A chicken drumstick

FACT – Only time can remove alcohol from your bloodstream. Black coffee, cold showers and fresh air will not sober you up.

How to drink sensibly

- Stick to the recommended guidelines.
- Try to have days when you do not drink alcohol.
- Alternate your alcoholic drinks with one containing no alcohol.
- Try not to drink on an empty stomach.
- Avoid buying in rounds, and drink slowly.
- Keep a daily drinks diary to monitor your consumption.
- Dilute your drinks - mix wine with soda, beer with lemonade. If you drink spirits, add lots of tonic, soda water or juice.
- Avoid spirits and extra strong lager or cider.

What are the benefits of cutting down?

Psychological/social/financial

- Improved mood.
- Improved relationships.
- Reduced risks of drink driving.
- Save money.

Physical

- Sleep better.
- More energy.
- Lose weight.
- No hangovers.
- Reduced risk of injury.
- Improved memory.
- Better physical shape.
- Reduced risk of:
 - high blood pressure
 - cancer
 - liver disease
 - brain damage.

Planning to cut down?

- When bored or stressed, have a workout instead of drinking.
- Avoid going to the pub after work.
- Plan activities and tasks at those times you would usually drink.
- When you do drink, set yourself a limit and stick to it.
- Have your first drink after starting to eat.
- Quench your thirst with non-alcoholic drinks before and in-between alcoholic drinks.
- Avoid drinking in rounds or in large groups.
- Switch to low-alcohol beer, lager or wine.
- Avoid or limit the time spent with 'heavy' drinking friends.

Helping change behaviour

Identification and treatment of an individual's alcohol problems can prevent and reduce the physical, mental and social harms that can arise.

In health care settings, review-level evidence suggests:

- heavy drinkers receiving brief interventions are twice as likely to moderate their drinking 6-12 months after an intervention, compared with drinkers receiving no intervention
- brief interventions can cause a 13-34% net reduction in weekly drinking, resulting in a significant effect on safe alcohol use
- the use of self help materials such as brochures, manuals and books is cost effective in decreasing at risk and harmful drinking.

What is a brief intervention?

A brief intervention can be as simple as raising the issue and asking some initial questions about a patient's alcohol use. Information about the effects of alcohol, where to get further help and encouragement to reduce consumption can be given. The following questions could be asked:

- do you feel you should cut down your drinking?
- has anyone ever criticised your drinking?

- have you ever felt guilty about how much you drink?
- do you need a drink to steady your nerves in the morning?

If the answer is **yes** to two or more questions, the patient could be psychologically and/or physically dependent on alcohol and should be offered help. They should be given information about the effects of alcohol, ways to cut down, ways to get further information and support and be encouraged to reduce consumption.

Once they know the facts, many people can quite easily revert back to sensible drinking if they are drinking above the safe limits. However, dependent drinkers may need referral for specialist help.

Local alcohol services

If you feel you are drinking too much or that alcohol is a problem for you contact:

ADDACTION – provides a confidential one to one counselling service in GP practices in Cornwall.

Over 18 yrs old – 03332000325 (available 24 hours)

Ages 11-18 (Addaction YZUP) – 01872 300816

General practitioners – you can access help through your GP surgery. GPs and practice staff can offer you treatment and a range of services, or signpost or refer you to other appropriate services.

Websites

Drinkline

www.knowyourlimits.gov.uk

National alcohol helpline providing information, advice and support. Has a database of local alcohol support services for anywhere in the country.

Freephone 0800 917 8282 (the number does not appear on phone bills).

Drinkaware.co.uk

www.drinkaware.co.uk

Interactive site with information about alcohol and drinking, practical tips to cut down, drinks diary and questionnaires.

Down your drink

www.downyourdrink.org.uk

A six week online programme to help users reduce drinking and develop safer drinking habits. Free and confidential.

Alcohol concern

www.alcoholconcern.org.uk

The national agency on alcohol misuse. General information about alcohol including useful factsheets. Call 020 7264 0510.

Adfam

www.adfam.org.uk

Information and advice for families of alcohol and drug users. The website has a list of local family support services. Call 020 7928 889.

Alcoholics Anonymous

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

A peer support organisation to help people stop drinking. Local groups throughout the county. Call 0845 769 7555.

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk/livewell/alcohol/Pages/Alcoholhome.aspx

A service that helps you to make the most out of your health and get the best out of the NHS.

References

Updated NICE guidance 2008 for Antenatal care

www.nice.org.uk/guidance/index.jsp?action=byID&o=11947

www.knowyourlimits.gov.uk

www.drinking.nhs.uk/questions/unit-calculator

Prevention of alcohol misuse (2004) Health Development Agency

If you would like this leaflet in large print, braille, audio version or in another language, please contact the General Office on 01872 252690

